"WE WILL CONTROL HIM": The 134-Year Pattern of Elite Miscalculation About Military Strongmen

Comparing Sieyès's Recruitment of Napoleon (18 Brumaire, 1799) and Von Papen's Appointment of Hitler (1933)

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I. INTRODUCTION

"In two months, we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he'll squeak."

Franz von Papen spoke these words in January 1933, days after orchestrating Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany. Von Papen—former Chancellor himself, Prussian aristocrat, representative of Germany's conservative establishment—radiated confidence. Hitler would be Chancellor, yes, but surrounded by traditional conservative ministers. Von Papen would serve as Vice-Chancellor with direct access to President Hindenburg. The military remained under professional officer control. The bureaucracy was staffed by career civil servants. Constitutional mechanisms would constrain any radical impulses.

The calculation was explicit: use Hitler's mass appeal and anti-communist credentials to destroy the left, then manage or discard him. Hitler was useful but controllable. He lacked their social class, political legitimacy, and institutional expertise. The conservative elites believed they understood how power actually worked in Germany. Hitler, they assumed, did not.

Eighteen months later, Hitler had absolute power. The Reichstag Fire Decree (February 28, 1933) suspended civil liberties permanently. The Enabling Act (March 23, 1933) granted dictatorial authority. By July 1933, all parties except the Nazis were banned and trade unions destroyed. The Night of the Long Knives (June 1934) saw Hitler murder not only SA leadership but conservative critics, demonstrating no one was safe. When Hindenburg died in August 1934, Hitler combined the offices of President and Chancellor as Führer. The military swore personal loyalty to Hitler—not to constitution or state, but to Adolf Hitler himself.

Von Papen survived physically but became politically irrelevant. His miscalculation had consequences beyond his fate: World War II killed over 70 million, the Holocaust murdered 6 million Jews plus millions more, German cities became rubble, and Germany was defeated, occupied, and divided for forty-five years.

One hundred thirty-four years earlier, on November 9-10, 1799 (18-19 Brumaire), a remarkably similar miscalculation played out in France. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, political theorist and Director, orchestrated a coup to replace the weak Directory with a stronger executive protecting bourgeois property threatened by Jacobin radicalism and royalist restoration. His plan required a military "sword" for force and mass appeal, but Sieyès—author of "What is the Third Estate?" and architect of revolutionary constitutions—would control actual policy.

Sieyès recruited Napoleon Bonaparte, the young general celebrated for victories in Italy and Egypt. Napoleon was popular but appeared politically naïve, needing Sieyès's guidance to navigate constitutional government. The coup succeeded: the legislature moved to Saint-Cloud, Napoleon commanded the troops, Directors resigned. When the Council of Five Hundred resisted, Napoleon's brother Lucien told soldiers that deputies had attacked Napoleon with daggers. Troops cleared the chambers by force.

Sieyès presented his constitutional design—three consuls with Sieyès as dominant political figure, Napoleon as military leader, carefully balanced powers limiting executive authority. Napoleon listened, then rewrote everything. The Constitution of Year VIII (December 24, 1799) made Napoleon First Consul with supreme power while the other consuls had advisory roles only. Napoleon appointed the Senate, issued decrees with force of law, controlled appointments. Sieyès was forced into ceremonial Senate presidency, given an estate as consolation, and retired from politics. Within weeks, Napoleon had transformed a coup designed to make him controllable into dictatorship with himself as absolute ruler.

Napoleon would rule France for fifteen years, conquer most of Europe, and pursue wars ultimately leading to French defeat. But he demonstrated that strongmen recruited by elites to protect their interests pursue their own agendas once granted power.

These episodes, separated by 134 years in radically different contexts, reveal a persistent pattern. When elites face crises threatening property and order that democratic institutions seem unable to contain, they recruit military strongmen with mass appeal, believing constitutional mechanisms, financial leverage, or superior political skill will maintain control. The strongmen escape control through force, popular mobilization, and ruthless consolidation. Elite intentions become irrelevant as strongmen pursue unlimited goals. Catastrophe results.

The pattern recurs because elites systematically make the same errors: underestimating strongmen's political capability, overestimating their own control capacity, failing to recognize that granting position creates independent authority, assuming strongmen share their limited goals, and believing in their own indispensability. These errors persist across elite generations because the structural conditions that create the dilemma recur cyclically and elite psychology remains remarkably stable.

Understanding this matters beyond historical curiosity. The 134-year span between Napoleon and Hitler—across the Industrial Revolution, democratization, and technological transformation—proves this is structural, not historical accident. If the pattern persisted through such radical change once, it can recur again. Contemporary conditions show disturbing

parallels: economic inequality approaching interwar levels, democratic dysfunction, institutional legitimacy crises, available scapegoats, and technology amplifying authoritarian capabilities far beyond Hitler's. The question is whether contemporary elites will repeat the fatal miscalculation or whether historical memory can prevent catastrophe.

II. FRANCE 1799: SIEYÈS'S FATAL CALCULATION

The Crisis

By 1799, revolutionary France had endured a decade of political upheaval, economic chaos, and warfare that left the Directory government weak and facing existential threats. The Directory—five Directors elected by the legislature under the Constitution of Year III—theoretically provided stable governance after the Terror. In practice, it faced paralysis from internal divisions, military dependence, and inability to satisfy either radicals or property owners.

The critical elite interest driving events was bourgeois property owners who had purchased confiscated Church lands (*biens nationaux*) and émigré estates. These transfers were revolutionary France's most significant material transformation: the Church owned approximately 10% of French land, and émigré nobles substantial additional estates. Revolutionary governments confiscated and sold these properties, creating a landowner class whose wealth depended entirely on these transfers being permanent.

This class faced threats from both directions. A Jacobin return—through electoral victory or revolutionary seizure—could reverse sales as insufficiently radical, confiscate "hoarded" wealth, or impose forced loans effectively expropriating the propertied. The Conspiracy of Equals (1796), though suppressed, showed proto-socialist movements retained support. The prospect terrified those who had bet fortunes on permanent transfers.

Equally threatening was royalist restoration. If the Bourbon monarchy returned, Church and émigrés would demand property restoration. Purchasers faced financial ruin and potential prosecution. Royalist strength in western and southern France showed monarchist sentiment remained powerful.

The Directory couldn't guarantee security. It lacked revolutionary fervor to inspire masses and traditional legitimacy to win conservative acceptance. It survived through election manipulation, military dependence, and financial expedients contributing to inflation.

By 1799, multiple crises converged. Militarily, the War of the Second Coalition saw French forces retreating. Economically, paper currency was worthless and tax collection inefficient. Politically, legislative councils divided between neo-Jacobins and conservatives made policy impossible. The perception grew that the Directory couldn't survive. For bourgeois property owners, democratic revival might bring Jacobins to power legally; royalist coup might restore

monarchy. Either threatened their property. What was needed: a stronger executive maintaining order, suppressing threats from both sides, guaranteeing property rights—but remaining under bourgeois elite control.

Sieyès's Plan

Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès entered this crisis as Director, elected May 1799. He brought impeccable credentials as author of "What is the Third Estate?" articulating bourgeois revolution's core argument. By 1799, he represented revolutionary bourgeois interests: preserve gains while preventing further radicalization and establishing stable governance under elite control.

Sieyès concluded constitutional revision was necessary but legal amendment practically impossible—procedures required years. During that time, the crisis would worsen, potentially producing Jacobin victory or royalist coup. If change was necessary but legal change impossible, extra-legal change became logical.

Sieyès's plan reflected confidence in constitutional engineering and assumptions about constraining ambition. He envisioned three consuls with himself as dominant political figure controlling policy through superior skill. Napoleon Bonaparte would serve as "the sword"—providing military force and popularity but subordinated to civilian authority. Roger Ducos would be third consul, allied with Sieyès.

The fatal assumption: Napoleon could be controlled. Sieyès viewed him as successful militarily but politically amateur needing guidance. Napoleon's background reinforced this: Corsican rather than metropolitan French, minor provincial nobility, risen through military talent rather than political connections, young (thirty) compared to experienced politicians. His military successes made him popular, but popularity wasn't power. He had minimal involvement in Directory politics. From Sieyès's perspective: perfect instrument with prestige for credible coup, military force for success, but dependent on Sieyès's expertise for aftermath.

The Coup of 18-19 Brumaire

The coup unfolded demonstrating how constitutional mechanisms could provide legal cover for power seizure.

November 9: The Council of Ancients convened early, told of fabricated Jacobin plot. Presented with danger reports, they voted to move the legislature to Saint-Cloud for "safety"—removing councils from Paris where public opinion might interfere. They appointed Napoleon to command all Paris troops, giving him legal authority over military force.

With Napoleon commanding troops and legislature reconvening next day, Sieyès and ally Paul Barras resigned as Directors, pressuring the other three to resign. With Napoleon's troops surrounding the Luxembourg Palace, all five positions became vacant with no legal mechanism for replacements.

November 10 brought the critical moment. The plan called for councils to dissolve the Directory, create provisional government with three consuls, and empower constitutional drafting. But when Napoleon entered the Five Hundred demanding compliance, he encountered fierce resistance. Deputies shouted him down with cries of "Outlaw him!"—invoking the decree that sent Robespierre to guillotine.

The coup nearly failed. But Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother and Council President, saved it through brazen lies. He told troops outside that armed assassins had attacked Napoleon with daggers and threatened republican deputies. He called on troops to protect the legislature from "terrorists." This was complete fabrication—no one attacked Napoleon, deputies were unarmed—but soldiers believed him. Grenadiers cleared the chambers by force.

Later, Lucien reassembled a rump session—30-40 deputies who were conspirators or intimidated—who voted to dissolve the Directory, create provisional government with three Consuls, and authorize constitutional drafting. This provided legal cover: the conspiracy could claim legislative approval, though votes occurred after force cleared chambers with tiny deputy fraction present.

Napoleon Seizes Control

The successful coup placed Sieyès, Ducos, and Napoleon as Provisional Consuls to draft constitution. Sieyès believed this was triumph—coup succeeded, Directory destroyed, his constitution would preserve gains while preventing radicalization. Napoleon would continue as sword while Sieyès controlled policy.

Napoleon had different plans. Over six weeks to December 24, Napoleon systematically outmaneuvered Sieyès, transforming constitutional design into dictatorship.

The process demonstrates Napoleon's political skill which Sieyès catastrophically underestimated. Napoleon attended drafting sessions, listened to Sieyès's complex checks and balances, then proposed "modifications" fundamentally transforming power distribution. Where Sieyès wanted equal consuls, Napoleon insisted First Consul must have supreme authority. Where Sieyès wanted independent Senate interpreting constitution, Napoleon insisted First Consul appoint Senate. Where Sieyès wanted legislative bodies with genuine power, Napoleon structured them ceremonially.

Napoleon's genius: maintaining appearance of accepting Sieyès's framework while changing substance. He didn't reject elaborate architecture—that would provoke opposition. Instead, he accepted structure but changed power distribution within it. Yes, three consuls—but First Consul has "greater power than the other two consuls." Yes, Senate—but First Consul appoints initial members who then coopt future members. Yes, legislative bodies—but Tribunate discusses laws without voting, Legislative Body votes without discussion, and Council of State (First Consul-appointed) drafts everything.

Sieyès couldn't resist despite recognizing implications. Napoleon had military force—troops loyal to him personally. Napoleon had popularity—public celebrated him while Sieyès was known only to elites. Napoleon had momentum—coup victory gave prestige and ability to claim knowing France's needs. When Sieyès objected, Napoleon could wait him out or threaten withdrawal, leaving Sieyès to govern alone without military backing.

The Constitution of Year VIII (December 24, 1799) established Napoleon as First Consul with vast concentrated power: making policy through Council of State, controlling administration through appointments, dominating judiciary, commanding military. The other consuls could advise, but the First Consul decided, period.

Within weeks, Napoleon transformed Sieyès's constitutional system into dictatorship with republican forms. Sieyès got Senate presidency (ceremonial with stipend) and an estate. He retired, watching as Napoleon crowned himself Emperor (1804) and pursued continental conquest leading to French defeat. Sieyès had been completely outplayed by the military "sword" he thought constitutional cleverness would control.

The pattern was complete: elite coordination, strongman recruitment, successful power seizure, immediate loss of control as strongman consolidated independent base. Bourgeois property owners got stronger executive and protection from threats, but at cost of submitting to Napoleon's personal rule rather than maintaining elite collective control.

III. GERMANY 1933: VON PAPEN'S DELUSION

The Weimar Crisis

When Hitler was appointed Chancellor January 30, 1933, Weimar Republic faced crisis as severe as the Directory's, though in dramatically different context. Germany was industrial with mass parties, democratic elections, sophisticated constitutional system—yet collapsing under economic catastrophe, political polarization, and elite fear of communist revolution.

The Depression hit devastatingly. Unemployment reached 6 million (30% of workforce). Industrial production fell 40%. Agricultural prices plummeted. The middle class saw economic security destroyed for the second time in fifteen years after hyperinflation (1923). Banks failed, credit disappeared, the system disintegrated.

This radicalized politics in ways terrifying conservative elites. The Communist Party (KPD) surged: 77 seats in September 1930, 89 in July 1932, 100 in November 1932. Combined with Social Democrats' 121 seats, the left commanded substantial representation. More ominously, Communists were explicitly revolutionary—seeking not capitalism reform but complete overthrow and dictatorship of the proletariat modeled on Soviet Union.

Critical elite interests threatened: Prussian Junkers feared land reform confiscating ancestral estates. Heavy industrialists (Krupp, Thyssen, IG Farben) feared nationalization and wealth expropriation. The military officer corps feared subordination to revolutionary control. Traditional bureaucracy feared replacement by Moscow-loyal cadres.

These weren't paranoid fantasies. The Bolshevik Revolution had expropriated estates, nationalized industry, established terror against former ruling classes. German Communist uprisings—Spartacist Revolt (Berlin, January 1919), Bavarian Soviet Republic (April-May 1919)—though suppressed, demonstrated revolutionary ambitions beyond elections. The Comintern coordinated revolutionary activity internationally. A Communist government could implement Soviet-style collectivization.

Weimar's democratic institutions appeared incapable of containing this decisively. Parliamentary government had broken down—coalitions collapsed repeatedly. President Hindenburg governed through Article 48 emergency decrees bypassing the Reichstag. Chancellors Brüning, von Papen, and Schleicher failed to gain sufficient backing.

By January 1933, Weimar democracy was dying from contradictions and elite abandonment. Conservative elites concluded parliamentary government couldn't simultaneously address Depression and contain communism. They wanted authoritarian solutions but feared military dictatorship lacking popular legitimacy. What was needed: authoritarian leader with mass appeal who could mobilize public support while protecting elite interests.

Von Papen's Strategy

Franz von Papen emerged as architect of the strategy to use Hitler while maintaining control. Quintessential Prussian aristocrat: wealthy Catholic family, military officer, Center Party politician, excellent Hindenburg connections. He'd briefly been Chancellor (May-November 1932) before losing support but retained influence with Hindenburg and conservative power brokers.

Von Papen's strategy: install Hitler as Chancellor in coalition cabinet where conservatives held most positions. The logic seemed straightforward: Hitler's Nazi Party was largest in Reichstag (though declining from 230 to 196 seats). Nazis had mass support among middle-class voters, farmers, youth. Hitler was violently anti-communist—SA fought street battles with Communist paramilitaries for years. Hitler promised restored national pride and reversed Versailles humiliations. His movement offered mass mobilization against left with nationalist rhetoric uniting Germans across class lines.

Von Papen believed Hitler controllable through several mechanisms. First, cabinet dominated by traditional conservatives: von Papen as Vice-Chancellor with Hindenburg access, von Neurath as Foreign Minister, von Krosigk as Finance, Gürtner as Justice. Only three of twelve positions to Nazis (Hitler as Chancellor, Frick as Interior, Göring without portfolio). Conservatives thought numerical superiority meant policy control while Hitler provided legitimacy and anti-communist muscle.

Second, military and bureaucracy under traditional control. Reichswehr commanded by professional Junker officers loyal to Hindenburg and German state. Civil service staffed by career bureaucrats. These structures would supposedly constrain Hitler—he couldn't implement policies without apparatus remaining in conservative hands.

Third, constitutional mechanisms existed. Hindenburg could dismiss Hitler anytime. Article 48 powers were Presidential. Reichstag could limit executive authority. Reichswehr could enforce martial law if Hitler exceeded bounds.

Fourth, fundamentally, conservatives believed Hitler dependent on their financial support, political legitimation, institutional expertise. Nazi Party had massive debts from 1932 campaigns. Hitler needed conservative funding, legitimation for Hindenburg respectability, bureaucratic and military expertise since Nazis were activists not administrators. This dependence would supposedly make Hitler beholden to conservative interests.

The fatal assumption, identical to Sieyès's: Hitler was crude populist lacking sophisticated understanding, manageable by clever establishment politicians. Von Papen's statement—"In two months, we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he'll squeak"—perfectly captured conservative confidence in controlling someone viewed as social and intellectual inferior. Hitler was Austrian-born, modest middle-class background, failed artist and corporal not officer class. His movement full of thugs and rabble. His rhetoric crude nationalism and antisemitism. Surely such a figure could be manipulated by sophisticated aristocrats understanding how power actually functioned.

Industrial Funding

On February 20, 1933—three weeks after Hitler became Chancellor—Hermann Göring hosted secret meeting with approximately 25 leading industrialists and financiers: Gustav Krupp, IG Farben executives, Deutsche Bank representatives, heavy industry magnates, and Hjalmar Schacht (former Reichsbank president, Hitler's economic advisor).

Hitler delivered 90-minute speech focusing on what industrialists wanted: destroying communist threat, eliminating unions, ending democratic "chaos," restoring "order," rebuilding military. He declared "private enterprise cannot be maintained in the age of democracy" because democratic governments let workers organize, demand wages, impose profit-limiting regulations. Solution: authoritarian government protecting business from labor and democratic constraints. He promised crushing Communists completely, eliminating unions, ensuring workers couldn't use strikes or bargaining to threaten production. He stated upcoming March 5 elections would be "last for next ten years"—signaling democracy elimination so business needn't worry about future left-wing governments.

After Hitler left, Göring asked for 3 million Reichsmarks for Nazi campaign. Schacht coordinated pledges: IG Farben 400,000, mining industry 400,000, Deutsche Bank 200,000, Krupp 1 million. Goebbels recorded: "Göring brings joyful news that 3 million available. Great thing! Hour later, machines rattle." This cash was critical—Nazi Party had been nearly bankrupt late 1932.

The industrialists' calculation was explicit: fund Hitler to destroy communist threat and unions, protecting property and profits. They expected benefits: rearmament bringing government contracts, union elimination reducing labor costs, authoritarian government protecting business from democratic redistribution pressures. Short term, their bet paid spectacularly—profits from rearmament, Aryanization, slave labor.

But like von Papen, industrialists made fatal error: believing they could control Hitler. They thought they were hiring muscle while retaining actual power. They discovered too late Hitler had agendas beyond crushing communists and protecting profits.

Consolidation: Chancellor to Führer in 18 Months

Hitler's consolidation proceeded with stunning speed, exploiting constitutional mechanisms conservatives thought would constrain him.

Reichstag Fire (February 27, 1933): Four weeks after becoming Chancellor, Hitler gained emergency powers providing legal dictatorship cover. The Reichstag burned February 27, almost certainly set by Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe. Whether Nazis planned remains disputed, but they exploited it. Hitler declared this began communist uprising and convinced Hindenburg to sign Reichstag Fire Decree "for Protection of People and State."

This decree (February 28) suspended civil liberties guaranteed by Weimar Constitution: speech, press, assembly, communications privacy, protections against arbitrary arrest. It allowed indefinite detention without charges, media censorship, banning organizations deemed threats. Critically, no expiration date and never rescinded—providing legal framework for dictatorship twelve years.

Enabling Act (March 23, 1933): Eight weeks after becoming Chancellor, Nazi-dominated Reichstag voted to abolish its own power. The "Law to Remedy Distress of People and Reich" granted Hitler's cabinet authority to enact laws without Reichstag approval for four years, including laws deviating from Constitution. Vote was 444-94, providing two-thirds majority for constitutional amendments.

Vote occurred under extraordinary circumstances. Communist deputies arrested or excluded using Reichstag Fire Decree. SA stormtroopers surrounded building chanting threats. Hitler promised using powers only for "vital" purposes and governing through existing institutions (both immediately broken). Catholic Center Party got Church protection promise for support (also betrayed).

Hitler now had dictatorial power wrapped in constitutional legitimacy. He used democratic Reichstag to vote away democracy with conservative elite acquiescence.

Gleichschaltung (March-July 1933): Four months systematically destroying alternative power centers through "coordination": banning unions (May 2), dissolving political parties (June-July), subordinating state governments, purging civil service (15% dismissed, replaced by Nazis). By

July, one-party state with comprehensive Nazi control maintaining orderly governance appearance.

Night of Long Knives (June 30-July 2, 1934): Eighteen months after becoming Chancellor, Hitler demonstrated complete independence through calculated mass murder. SA under Ernst Röhm had grown to 3 million members, dwarfing 100,000-man Reichswehr. Röhm demanded "Second Revolution" including absorbing Reichswehr into SA and implementing socialist economics.

This alarmed military and industrialists. Hindenburg warned Hitler that if he couldn't control SA, military would impose martial law. Hitler chose power over loyalty. SS units, Gestapo, police arrested and murdered SA leadership—Röhm shot in cell. Approximately 85-200 killed. But Hitler also eliminated non-SA enemies: former Chancellor Schleicher and wife shot in home, Gregor Strasser murdered, Edgar Jung killed.

Conservative elite response revealed moral bankruptcy: they welcomed the purge. Defense Minister von Blomberg stated military "certainly impressed by efficiency." July 3, cabinet passed legislation declaring murders legal retroactively: "measures taken...are legal as acts of self-defense by State."

Hitler made murder legal by decree, demonstrated willingness to kill anyone including allies and critics, proved to elites he'd protect their interests against radicalism, showed constitutional constraints meant nothing when executive controlled force.

Combining Offices (August 1934): When Hindenburg died August 2, Hitler immediately combined President and Chancellor as Führer. Most critically, military oath changed from constitutional loyalty to personal loyalty: "I swear by God this sacred oath that I will render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler." Officers couldn't claim defending constitution—they'd sworn personal obedience to Hitler himself. This paralyzed military resistance eleven years until failed July 20, 1944 assassination.

Timeline: January 30 appointment, March 23 Enabling Act, June 30-July 2 purge, August 2 Führer. Eighteen months to absolute power. Von Papen's two-month prediction off by factor of nine.

Catastrophic Outcomes

Hitler's consolidation revealed von Papen and conservative elites catastrophically misjudged both capability and intentions. Hitler systematically used mechanisms they thought constraining—constitutional procedures, cabinet government, military autonomy—to concentrate power. Once controlling police, propaganda, and military through personal oath, elites had no leverage.

More devastatingly, Hitler's goals went far beyond elite intentions. They wanted Communist destruction and order restoration. He delivered that, plus:

Territorial expansion leading to WWII: Rhineland remilitarization (1936), Austria annexation (1938), Czechoslovakia occupation (1938-39), Poland invasion (1939), attacking France/Low Countries/Denmark/Norway (1940), Soviet Union invasion (1941). This was Hitler's goal from beginning—*Mein Kampf*—but elites dismissed as rhetoric not policy.

Racial policies beyond conservative endorsement: Nuremberg Laws (1935), Kristallnacht (1938), Holocaust murdering 6 million Jews plus millions Roma, disabled, political prisoners. Conservative antisemitism was social discrimination not systematic genocide.

Totalitarian dictatorship subordinating all institutions including business. Industrialists profited from rearmament, Aryanization, slave labor but lost autonomy. Hitler didn't nationalize but subordinated to war production, imposed controls, directed investment.

Catastrophic defeat: WWII killed 70+ million, destroyed German cities through bombing, resulted in total defeat, occupation, division for forty-five years. Conservative elites watched nation destroyed, wealth lost. Many faced war crimes trials though most escaped consequences.

Von Papen's boast about squeezing Hitler proved among history's most disastrously wrong predictions. Within two months, Hitler had emergency powers, Enabling Act, destroyed Communists and unions. Eighteen months, absolute power. Six years, continental war. Twelve years, total destruction. Conservative elites hiring "controllable muscle" empowered ideological revolutionary whose unlimited ambitions destroyed everything they sought protecting.

IV. THE PATTERN REVEALED

Identical Structural Foundations

Placing these cases side-by-side reveals not isolated accidents but systematic pattern. The parallels constitute template for how elite miscalculation about controlling military strongmen produces catastrophe.

Both cases featured property-owning elites facing threats from democratic or revolutionary forces that could implement redistribution. Both featured weak governments unable to contain threats through normal means. Both featured available strongmen with military credentials and mass appeal who could plausibly crush opposition and restore "order."

The similarity despite vastly different contexts—pre-industrial France versus industrial Germany, revolutionary versus democratic framework, Continental warfare versus global depression—demonstrates structural pattern not historical contingency. When these conditions align, elites face temptation to coordinate with strongmen promising to protect interests through authoritarian means.

Identical Elite Errors

Both Sieyès and von Papen orchestrated coalitions of threatened property owners to recruit military strongmen they believed controllable. Both designed elaborate constraint mechanisms: Sieyès through constitutional engineering, von Papen through cabinet control and institutional structures. Both assumed strongmen were politically unsophisticated needing elite guidance. Both were catastrophically wrong.

The control mechanisms—constitutional frameworks, cabinet positions, institutional structures, financial leverage—proved worthless once strongmen had force and popular support. Napoleon rewrote Sieyès's constitution within weeks. Hitler used constitutional mechanisms to eliminate constraints within months.

Five systematic errors emerge:

First, underestimating strongman political capability based on class prejudice, age bias, sector expertise assumptions. Both Napoleon and Hitler proved extraordinarily skilled operators understanding power dynamics, manipulating procedures, building coalitions, outmaneuvering supposedly sophisticated politicians.

Second, overestimating own control capacity through institutional mechanisms and expertise. Once strongmen commanded personally-loyal troops and enjoyed popular support, elite institutional position meant nothing. Constitutional structures proved worthless against force.

Third, failing to recognize granting position creates independent authority. Once Napoleon commanded troops and Hitler controlled police, they didn't need elite approval—position and force created own authority independent of who granted it.

Fourth, assuming strongmen shared limited goals. Sieyès wanted constitutional stability; Napoleon wanted European empire. Von Papen wanted communism crushed; Hitler wanted racial revolution and totalitarian transformation. Strongmen pursued unlimited ambitions once granted power.

Fifth, believing in own indispensability. Sieyès thought Napoleon needed his expertise; von Papen thought Hitler needed conservative legitimation. Both strongmen marginalized or eliminated the elites who elevated them, demonstrating expendability not indispensability.

How Consolidation Worked

Despite timeline differences (Napoleon's weeks versus Hitler's eighteen months), both consolidations followed identical logic:

Move faster than elites anticipate: Both consolidated before elites could organize resistance, presenting fait accompli rather than gradual evolution.

Use legal mechanisms elites designed: Napoleon used Sieyès's constitutional framework; Hitler used Weimar's emergency provisions. Legal cover made resistance harder by transforming coup into apparently legal transition.

Build independent power bases: Napoleon through military loyalty and administrative appointments; Hitler through SS, personal military oath, party apparatus, police control. These bases meant independence from elite approval.

Eliminate or marginalize elite partners: Napoleon sidelined Sieyès ceremonially; Hitler murdered Schleicher and Jung, sidelined von Papen, subordinated all conservatives. Message: strongman now independent, former partners expendable.

Pursue agendas beyond elite intentions: Napoleon wanted glory and conquest; Hitler wanted racial revolution. Neither constrained by elite wishes once having power and force.

Why Outcomes Differed in Scale Not Pattern

Napoleon and Hitler both escaped elite control identically, but outcomes differed in catastrophe scale. Napoleon ruled fifteen years, conquered Europe, but France survived with revolutionary transfers preserved. Hitler ruled twelve years, conquered Europe, but led Germany to total destruction with Holocaust murdering millions.

Differences stemmed from: (1) strongman goals—Napoleon pursued glory not racial extermination; (2) technological capacity—Hitler's mechanized warfare and industrial genocide killed orders of magnitude more than Napoleon's muskets and cannons; (3) opposition coordination—Hitler faced coordinated Grand Alliance while Napoleon faced slowly-forming separate coalitions.

But these were degree variations not pattern differences. Core dynamic was identical: elite miscalculation led to empowering strongman, strongman escaped control, strongman pursued unlimited ambitions beyond elite intentions, catastrophic defeat resulted harming elites who empowered them.

V. WHY THIS PATTERN RECURS

The 134-year gap spanning Industrial Revolution, democratization, and technological transformation didn't prevent pattern recurrence with nearly identical dynamics. This demands explanation. The pattern recurs because structural conditions create same dilemmas, elite psychology produces same errors, and power consolidation logic operates similarly across contexts.

The Fundamental Elite Dilemma

At root lies fundamental tension in systems combining democratic politics with concentrated property ownership. When property distributes unequally—small elites owning most wealth while masses own little—and political systems give masses voting or revolutionary capacity, property-owning elites risk democratic or revolutionary politics producing wealth redistribution threatening holdings.

This is structural not accidental. French bourgeois owners understood wealth depended on revolutionary transfers being permanent, but Directory couldn't guarantee permanence if Jacobins won elections or royalists staged restoration. German Junkers and industrialists faced prospect that democratic elections might produce Communist-Socialist coalitions legally implementing reform and nationalization.

This recurs cyclically because: property concentration regenerates even after redistributions; economic crises periodically radicalize masses making redistributive politics attractive; democratic institutions once introduced empower non-elite political voice mobilizable for redistribution; revolutionary possibilities persist when state capacity weakens.

Why Elites Believe They Can Control Strongmen

Given the dilemma—threatened by redistribution but dependent on political order—the strongman option appears attractive. But why believe controllable despite historical evidence?

Class contempt and social distance: Elites consistently underestimate strongmen due to prejudice. Napoleon was Corsican minor nobility not French aristocracy; Hitler was Austrian failed artist not Prussian Junker. Social distance breeds contempt. This assumption persists because elite socialization continually reinforces it—each generation taught they possess superior capabilities, non-elites lack sophistication for governance.

Institutional confidence: Elites believe constitutional mechanisms will constrain because these have historically served elite interests. But institutional constraints only function when backed by power willing to enforce them. When strongmen control force and enjoy popular legitimacy, formal structures become paper barriers.

Financial leverage: Elites assume financial dependence creates controllability. But strongmen once in power access state resources dwarfing private wealth. Moreover, strongmen use coercion to extract resources rather than depending on elite cooperation.

Historical precedent misread: Elites selectively remember successes where military force served elite purposes, forgetting failures. Past successes create dangerous confidence blinding them to systematic dangers.

Why Control Always Fails

Even recognizing potential dangers, elites underestimate how quickly strongmen consolidate independent power. Failure follows systematic logic:

Power creates authority: Force plus legitimacy equals power. Once commanding loyal troops and enjoying popular support, strongmen don't need elite intermediaries. This operates faster than elites anticipate—Napoleon within weeks, Hitler within months.

Institutional capture: Strongmen infiltrate and subordinate institutions through appointments, intimidation, coordination faster than elites recognize. Within months, apparently independent institutions become thoroughly subordinated.

Violence breaks rules: Strongmen willing to use violence against elites themselves break implicit coordination rules. Violence eliminates mutual security assumption allowing elite bargaining. When strongmen introduce violence, elites must submit or risk death—most choose submission.

Mass base independence: Popular support means strongmen don't need elite approval once consolidated. Both governed through plebiscites, propaganda, mobilization rather than elite consensus, claiming to represent "the people" directly.

Elite fragmentation: Elites never unified. Some enthusiastically support strongmen, others remain skeptical but don't resist, minority actively opposes but fragmented. This prevents unified resistance that might constrain strongmen before consolidation.

The Temporal Mismatch

Critical element: mismatch between elite and strongman timeframes. Elites think in stable equilibrium and gradual change, imagining time to assess and adjust. Strongmen think in opportunity and rapid consolidation, moving decisively before resistance organizes. By time elites recognize escaped control, consolidation is complete and resistance requires violent confrontation with forces loyal to strongman.

Why This Ensures Recurrence

These dynamics—elite dilemma, psychological errors, power consolidation logic, temporal mismatch—aren't historically contingent but persist across contexts. The pattern will recur whenever similar conditions align:

The conditions recur cyclically in capitalist democracies. Elite psychology reproduces across generations through socialization. Strongmen remain available combining military force and political ambition. Power logic operates universally—force plus legitimacy creates independence, institutional capture and violence function similarly across contexts.

The 134-year gap between Napoleon and Hitler demonstrates recurrence across radical transformation. If it recurred once despite such differences, it can recur whenever conditions align and elites make same miscalculation.

VI. CONTEMPORARY WARNING

The Pattern's Persistence Test

The most disturbing conclusion: the 134-year span proves pattern persistence across transformations that should have prevented recurrence. From 1799 to 1933, civilization experienced technological revolution (agricultural to industrial, mechanized warfare, mass media), political transformation (revolutionary instability to democratic constitution, universal suffrage, mass parties), social transformation (rural peasant to urbanized industrial, universal literacy, labor movements), ideological transformation (nationalism to competing ideologies), economic transformation (mercantilism to industrial capitalism, global trade, modern finance).

Yet pattern recurred with nearly identical dynamics. If it persisted across such radical transformation once, there's no reason to believe it cannot recur again. Specific forms will differ—contemporary strongmen won't command SA stormtroopers—but structural dynamics remain operative. This is the test the pattern passed: 134 years of transformation didn't eliminate it.

Contemporary Parallels

Examining contemporary conditions reveals disturbing parallels:

Economic inequality now approaches 1920s-30s levels. U.S. top 1% owns approximately 40% of wealth. The 2008 crisis, COVID pandemic, ongoing instability created middle-class precarity comparable to interwar period. This creates same elite dilemma: property-owning elites feel threatened by democratic redistribution pressures.

Many democracies face legitimacy crises. Political polarization makes governance difficult. Populist movements challenge institutions claiming corruption. Economic crises appear beyond government capacity to resolve through normal politics. This creates perception that democratic institutions are inadequate.

Available scapegoats exist: immigrants blamed for economic problems, religious minorities portrayed as identity threats, racial minorities facing discrimination, "elites" blamed for ordinary people's problems. These can be mobilized by strongmen seeking mass support.

Most ominously, contemporary technology amplifies capabilities orders of magnitude beyond Hitler's: social media reaching billions with algorithmic manipulation, digital surveillance enabling comprehensive monitoring, digital finance allowing instantaneous wealth extraction, drone and cyber warfare enabling force projection with minimal visibility. If Hitler amplified mechanisms 10-100x, contemporary technology amplifies 1000-10,000x.

The Crucial Lesson

Once elites grant position and force to ambitious strongmen, control cannot be maintained through institutional mechanisms, financial leverage, or political skill. The bargain is irreversible: force creates independence, popular legitimacy bypasses elites, constitutional mechanisms are captured, violence eliminates resistance, consolidation proceeds faster than anticipated.

Prevention requires recognizing danger before granting power. Once strongmen have position, force, and mass support, prevention becomes exponentially more difficult. The sequence must be interrupted early: recognize elite coordination, defend institutions, limit emergency powers, maintain civilian control, reject elite-strongman bargains.

The Uncomfortable Truth

Hitler's suicide was eighty years ago—within living memory. Elites who profited from Nazi rule lived into 1970s-80s. Their children and grandchildren control major corporations and institutions today. The institutional continuities are direct and documented.

The comfortable narrative that "we've learned from history" and "it can't happen here" serves elite interests by obscuring persistent danger. The uncomfortable truth: structural conditions producing elite willingness to coordinate with strongmen recur cyclically, elite psychology producing miscalculation remains unchanged, technology has made authoritarian consolidation both easier and more catastrophic.

The 134-year pattern from Napoleon to Hitler demonstrates this is not historically contingent but structurally persistent. Eighty years from Hitler is not safety but warning. When economic crisis combines with democratic redistributive pressure and institutional dysfunction, elites face temptation to recruit strongmen. Whether they repeat the fatal miscalculation depends on whether historical memory can overcome structural pressures and psychological errors.

CONCLUSION

On January 30, 1933, Franz von Papen orchestrated Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, confident conservative elites could control him. "In two months, we will have pushed Hitler so far into a corner that he'll squeak." Within eighteen months, Hitler had absolute power. Within twelve years, over 70 million dead, Holocaust murdering millions, Germany destroyed.

One hundred thirty-four years earlier, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès orchestrated Napoleon's coup, confident he could control the young general as his "sword." Within weeks, Napoleon had rewritten the constitution concentrating all power in his hands. Sieyès spent thirty-five years in wealthy irrelevance while Napoleon conquered Europe and led France through fifteen years of wars ending in defeat.

These episodes reveal a persistent structural pattern. When elites face crises threatening property that democratic institutions seem unable to contain, they recruit military strongmen with

mass appeal, believing constitutional mechanisms, financial leverage, or superior skill will maintain control. The strongmen escape through force, popular mobilization, ruthless consolidation. Elite intentions become irrelevant as strongmen pursue unlimited goals. Catastrophe results.

The pattern recurs because the elite dilemma—property concentration under democratic politics creates redistribution vulnerability—emerges cyclically during economic crises. Elite psychology remains constant: class contempt, institutional confidence, financial leverage assumptions. Power consolidation logic operates universally: force plus legitimacy creates independence, institutional capture, violence breaking rules.

The 134-year gap proves pattern persistence. If it survived Industrial Revolution, democratization, technological transformation from Napoleonic nationalism to twentieth-century totalitarianism, there's no reason to believe it disappeared in the eighty years since Hitler. Contemporary conditions show disturbing parallels with technology amplifying authoritarian capabilities far beyond Hitler's.

The fundamental lesson: granting power to strongmen is irreversible. Once strongmen command force and enjoy popular support, elite control mechanisms fail systematically. Constitutional constraints are captured, financial leverage disappears, violence eliminates resistance, consolidation proceeds faster than elite reaction.

Von Papen thought he was clever. Sieyès thought he was indispensable. Both discovered that cleverness and indispensability mean nothing against force and popular mobilization. Contemporary elites tempted to coordinate with strongmen will discover the same truth—but recognition will come too late, after irreversible consolidation and during unfolding catastrophe.

The pattern persists because it's structural, not historical. The danger is present, not past. Granting power to strongmen always fails to achieve elite control and frequently leads to catastrophic outcomes far worse than the threats elites sought to prevent. History does not repeat precisely, but structures recur.

Eighty years from Hitler is not safety but proximity. When conditions align, the choice will be whether historical memory prevents elite miscalculation or whether the pattern recurs with contemporary technology amplifying the catastrophe beyond even World War II's devastation.

The mechanisms are available. The technology is more powerful. The structural conditions recur. The elite psychology persists.

This is the warning: "We will control him" has always been a fatal lie. It was a lie when Sieyès said it about Napoleon. It was a lie when von Papen said it about Hitler. It will be a lie when contemporary elites say it about future strongmen.

Break the pattern. Recognize the danger. Refuse the bargain.

The alternative is catastrophe.

"WE WILL CONTROL HIM"

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